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"THE ASCENSION"
BY TINTORETTO

A Clever Work of Art
(See opposite page)

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HAVING considered Gérôme's great picture let us consider a merely clever one by Tintoretto.

If a man's place in the hierarchy of art must be determined by his greatest work then Tintoretto was one of the six greatest masters of the Renaissance, because he painted "The Miracle of Saint Mark," a marvel of drawing and painting and an altogether satisfying work of art, having far more repose than usually is found in his works, most of which, except his portraits, are so tempestuous that many of them weary us the more the longer we look at them. Then he painted a number of pictures which are so incomplete and therefore unsatisfying—rendering with details, that were slouched, badly composed, badly drawn and painted and therefore irritating—because the forms are unrealized; but they still have certain qualities of a high order. His "Ascension" in the Scuolo di San Rocco at Venice is one of these, see opposite page.

Here is a distinctly historical work by an old master although of a religious character and one of those works which prove that, late in the Renaissance era, the great masters did not paint Biblical subjects in the costumes of their time, but in ideal or classical costumes—the smart Monsieur Alfred Stevens to the contrary notwithstanding. This is merely a clever work of art, not a great work, even though Ruskin may have thought it great. For though he was right in some things with regard to Tintoretto, he was very wrong with regard to others.

To begin with: the *conception* of the subject is spoiled by showing Christ like an acrobat balancing himself on the back of an angel, because as Mantegna shows at Florence in his picture of the same subject in the Uffizi Gallery—a much better conception than Tintoretto's although not so cleverly painted—if Christ could ascend to the skies at all he could do so without the need of an angel carrying him on his back. Therefore the more we reflect over this angel carrying the heavy load of a large man on his back the funnier it becomes. Hence his conception is faulty.

Then the *composition* is, in some respects childish. Why put the head of Christ so close to the frame? in order to give the feeling that he is passing out of it? It does the contrary. It makes us feel that he is bumping his head against the frame. Then, why put the three big, lumpy, opaque clouds in the center of the picture which look more like sacks of laundry falling from the sky than clouds, and thus help to destroy the "airiness" of the picture? It is absurd. Why separate two of the disciples from the rest and place them in the background? If for the purpose of filling the space, it would have been better filled by a charming landscape.

Then the *expression* is faulty throughout the picture. It is true this is a religious picture, but it is also an historical. For it records one of the momentous occurrences of history—Christ leaving

his disciples and ascending again to heaven. Therefore, it required for profundity of expression *dramatic unity*. But the work lacks that essential quality; it violates the most important law of successful art *concentration of effects*—and so it scatters the attention of the beholder instead of concentrating it—in order to help the expressiveness of the work.

Note that the disciples are scattered about in groups and single figures and are doing things they would not have done in real life. Hence dramatic unity is violated apparently for the sake of a decorative composition. In real life there would not have been the figure in the left-hand corner holding an enormous book. In Christ's day they had no books like that. The figure moreover looks like a "steal" from Raphael's "Transfiguration." And besides it is badly drawn in parts. Then the man seated on the right would not be in that cramped position. And the group of two, in the distance, would not be so far away from the others, because Christ's leave-taking would have brought and held the twelve more closely together. Mantegna who was inferior to Tintoretto as a "painter" managed the same matter much better in his "Ascension," likewise Titian in his great "Assumption."

Then: how commonplace the head of Christ, how inexpressive—compared to the head of Christ in Leonardo's "Last Supper"? How lacking in expression are nearly all of the faces! Everywhere we have an irritating lack of *religious feeling* in the expression, making us feel like telling him: "Well, now go on and finish your picture!"

Then the *drawing* is a remarkable mixture of splendid drawing of movement and "go," and bad drawing in the details. For a man who can draw as marvelously as Tintoretto did in his "Miracle of Saint Mark" and in other works, he did some of the most conscienceless drawing among the old masters. In this picture notice the feet of the angel beneath the clouds; notice the hands on the man seated in the left-hand corner the one near the frame having but four fingers, etc.—faults all over for a man who loves fine drawing, faults which Tintoretto could easily have avoided if he had had his heart in his business and had had more conscience.

But when it came to *color-work* the old bear scored heavily in this brilliant color scheme and clever manipulation. For how easily he seems to have obtained those good effects which we do find in the picture—as if he had been a sublime child and merely playing with things as a boy juggles with apples! From this point of view it is astonishingly clever. It is that which makes it clever. It is that which, moreover, keeps it in the class of clever art. Query: was it one of his "pot-boilers"? Certainly it falls far below his "Miracle of Saint Mark."

As for the *technique* displayed: surely there was here no great effort made at any sort of technique. It is one of Tintoretto's rapidly written pages of

history thrown off with a marvelous dash, without a model, without much labor—a triumph of facility by a man with a fiery turbulent temperament and a power of visualization rare indeed. In fact the more we analyze this work, the more we see that Tintoretto *trivialized* a great subject. We soon feel that he was not himself highly emotioned by his subject and that it was executed quickly for some church or convent. In short, he was neither serious nor sincere in this work, and so merely *interests* us without rousing our emotion. The result is it does not strike emotion from any one except those paint faddists who are daft on “clever painting,” and even they are soon wearied. And then, what do they do? The poor Bohemians run off and whine about the “dreariness” of historical and the “punkiness” of religious pictures, without ever having taken the trouble to study the difference between such a great historical picture as is Gérôme’s “Death of Caesar” and the inferior

historical picture like this “Ascension of Christ” by Tintoretto.

In short, all that saves this work which we are considering from being called hopelessly trivial is the great subject chosen, and the undoubtedly clever and even powerful color work, and a certain decorative movement that is not to be despised. It shows a great master at work here, even if in an “off moment” when he was not keyed up to doing his best to be great.

This example of a great subject being trivialized by faulty conception, faulty composition, faulty drawing and weak expression, in spite of its clever work and technical leger-de-main absolves us from the duty of analyzing, this month, a trivial work of art, because it shows how a great artist can become trivial by not seriously and conscientiously making the most that he can of every subject he handles, above all of such a historical subject as Christ going home to his Father.

THE SWIMMER

I dive where the gleaming rollers play—
Green caves under the foam and spray—
And swim far out where the waves coquet
With the sunbeams dancing a minuet
And turn and drift on the limpid bed,
Arms tucked under the resting head.
As I dream in the rock of the restless swell
The sky curves up like a great sea-shell.

Or I dart down under the aquamarine
Searching the depths of luminous green
And pressing up with the palms of the hands
I pierce to the rocks and the silver sands
Where the shell-fish cling and the seaweeds flow
Down in the strange green twilight glow
That is never dim and is never bright;
And I shoot up, up through the wavering light.

Like a plunging seal I swiftly swim
Joyous back from the blue sea-brim:
Out and over and in and back
My flashing arms cleave a foamy track
And I gulp my breath in, deep and quick,
As I forge ahead with the scissor-kick
And I spring on the shining breaker-crests
And shoot to land on their snowy breasts
And the sea-spray drips as I leap and run
Across the sands in the noonday sun.

Phoebe Hoffman